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TAGS: [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [EFIS](#) [ETRD](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: GALAPAGOS NEW YEAR: NO CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION

REF: A. A. 04QUITO 2614

[1](#)B. B. 04QUITO 565

[1](#)C. C. 04QUITO 1501

[1](#)D. D. 04QUITO 1559 AND 1571

[1](#)E. E. 04QUITO 2502

[1](#)1. Summary. Violent strikes, instability, disregard for conservation, and political expediency have plagued the Galapagos over the past year. Unfortunately, the New Year brought no cause for celebration. It now appears likely that the Minister of the Environment, Fabian Valdivieso, will open the Galapagos Marine Reserve to longline fishing. Valdivieso's commitment to transparency and independence in the Galapagos National Park (GNP) Director selection process also appears to be waning (Ref A). The lack of protection of the resources in the Galapagos under the current GNP Director's tenure garnered front-page coverage in the local press and forced the President to call for an investigation. The Ambassador and members of the Mission continue to push for stability and conservation with targeted members of the GOE. End Summary.

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2004: A Sad Review  
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[1](#)2. The past year in the Galapagos has been tragic. A series of violent strikes and a parade of park directors have destabilized management of the park and virtually paralyzed monitoring and enforcement in the Galapagos Marine Reserve. The Gutierrez administration has politically exploited the park in order to garner votes from other political parties to support the President.

[1](#)3. The year started off with the fishermen in the Galapagos protesting in January over environmental regulations. The fishermen restricted access to the GNP and the Charles Darwin Research Station but were not violent (Ref B). In May, the fishermen protested a decision to regulate the sea cucumber season (Ref C). In June, this developed into a full strike that became violent. The fishermen blockaded the island of Hispanola, not permitting tourists to enter or depart. The fishermen completely took over the GNP, cutting off all access to and from the park. The strikers attacked two police vehicles, briefly took over a gas station, and hurled rocks and Molotov cocktails at GNP buildings (Ref D). In September, the employees of the GNP went on strike, protesting the replacement of the park director with someone closely aligned with the fishing sector (Ref E). While the park employees were not violent, club-wielding fishermen stormed the park in order to install their man as park director.

[1](#)4. The revolving door of GNP Directors has, more than anything, destabilized park management and caused paralysis within the park. In the eight years prior to President Gutierrez assuming office the GNP had only one Director. Over the past two years there have been ten directors, four from September to December 2004.

[1](#)5. Further, a majority (226) of the GNP's employees (roughly 300) work under contracts that expired on December 31, 2004. The interim director, who is also a favorite son of the fishing interests, has said that there is no money available in the Ministry of Finance to renew non-essential contracts. Accordingly, he decided that the head of monitoring and enforcement for the marine reserve was one of the non-essential positions. Even though Valdivieso later reversed this decision publicly, the incumbent's contract was never renewed. The same is occurring with other essential positions, such as the Chief of the Marine Reserve on Isabela Island. Currently, only 76 of the contract positions have been renewed, leaving the 138,000 square kilometer marine reserve essentially unmonitored.

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2005: No Cause for Celebration  
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[1](#)6. This year is shaping up to be as bleak as last. Having essentially taken over control of the GNP, the fishermen are now proposing opening parts of the marine reserve to longline tuna fishing. The economic basis of the proposal seems to be more the potential lucrative gains from the bycatch (shark and other high value species) than the more modest earnings possible from the tuna fishery.

17. The independent and transparent process for selecting permanent GNP Directors is floundering. The current Minister has not shown any intent to implement the process. He has not even submitted the required Presidential Decree for review. The proposed process may be shelved if Valdivieso is replaced with his likely successor, Ruben Moreno, the current number two at the Ministry.

18. The mismanagement of 2004 has also adversely affected the GNP's international standing and ability to compete for funding. Both the Ford and Moore Foundations have suspended potential donations to the GNP because of instability in the park.

19. On an optimistic note, a new marine research and patrol vessel (financed by the International Development Bank) has been commissioned. This vessel can stay at sea for extended periods of time, and should give monitoring personnel greater enforcement capability, if their contracts are renewed. Also, recent press coverage and editorial commentary has echoed the concerns of conservation and donor groups over instability and lack of vision in the Galapagos. This prompted President Gutierrez to call for an investigation of GNP management.

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U.S. Mission Actions  
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10. Post continues to press the GOE to prioritize conservation of the Galapagos. The Ambassador has instructed USAID to visit the Galapagos to meet with new political authorities, evaluate the use of our resources in the archipelago, and unify the message of concern with other donors. Political officers will raise the issue of conservation and donor investments with key members of Congress. Economic officers will meet with Ministry of Finance officials to push for funding for appropriate staffing levels in the GNP. MilGroup will lobby for stepped-up patrolling and increased vigilance to eliminate violent strikes in the GNP. Consulate Guayaquil and Embassy will press key tourist sector contacts to become more vocal in expressing environmental concerns. And the Ambassador will continue to lobby the President and the Ministers of the Environment and Tourism for stability, transparency, and increased conservation.

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Comment  
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11. Rumors continue to fly that MOE Valdivieso's days are numbered. His likely successor, Ruben Moreno, is the current number two at the ministry ) and well known to us as a political operative loyal to Gutierrez with no background or interest in environmental matters. It became evident over the past six months that his was the hand behind the turmoil in the GNP, trying to buy congressional votes with park positions. If he is named Minister, conservation will undoubtedly take even more of a back seat to political expediency.

KENNEY